

'CRASH ORIGIN'

by Stanley Lieber

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CRASH ORIGIN

tags: 1987, piro, tab1, tab2

1

Le Bourget, Paris, 1987.

Mid-morning. Overcast. Thomas and Piotr are threading through a crowd of spectators.

“Sunscreen check,” announces Piotr.

“But the sun’s not even out,” complains Thomas.

Piotr shoots him a look. “Safety first. Next, comfort.”

Thomas produces a small tube of sunscreen from his pocket and proceeds to apply it evenly across his nose and cheeks.

“Satisfied?” he asks.

“Never,” Piotr replies, “But I’m close to spectacular.”

Thomas observes the slight distance between them, then bumps shoulders with his twin brother.

“Not in the field,” Thomas says, his thoughts apparently moving towards evening.

My son is never prepared for anything. This is intersubjectively testable. Try surprising him. You’ll find him unprepared. Example: Send a number of military jets crashing into the ground. You’ll find he can think of no response. Piotr is always pulling clean-up duty.

This has been the steady pattern, played out over two decades.

The boy has now turned thirty. The peak of his operational powers. Still, he does nothing. Sits there and trades one-liners with his partner. No return on investment. My reports frequently exaggerate his exploits.

After all, this all comes out of my budget.

Sunlight cracks the clouds as the first plane careens into the pavement. I steer a brightly painted Mig-29 into the crowd, accidentally clipping a building in the process. Debris pelts the bystanders below. Probably, eighty or ninety dead. Thomas and Piotr are a few hundred yards off, but they enjoy a clear line of sight to the carnage.

Thomas' response?

Bewilderment, at first. My son stands transfixed. He fingers his visor, instinctively, but evinces no other reaction. Not even a change in his facial expression.

Piotr suffers no such paralysis. He shifts contexts with ease, drawing his side-arm and sweeping the corridor overhead. When no new danger presents itself, he looks towards Tommy.

Priorities.

I bring in the next two planes simultaneously. A pair of old RF-4Es. Piotr's side-arm is quite naturally useless against the two masses traveling at such a velocity. For his part, Thomas remains riveted to his spot. Even if his visor is malfunctioning, there is still the sound, the smoke from multiple impacts that has surely reached his nostrils. Why doesn't he react?

Piotr grasps him by the back of the shirt and hurls him behind a high wall as flames envelop the vacant space beside them.

2

This is not how I expected it to happen.

At the same time, it very much conforms to my vision of the destruction. Even if the alarm is ringing six years late.

The planes are falling.

Piro is yanking on my shirt, we're diving behind a building. There are flames.

6

That first plane was Soviet. Seems to be a multilateral engagement.

The logical result of *Glasnost*?

Of course, I'm not harmed. I'm invulnerable. Class 100 strength. Flight.

Piotr's photographic reflexes aren't much use against disintegrating architecture, but he has a knack for getting out of the way of large objects.

I punch my way through the wall and barrel face first through the smoke. Bodies are splayed everywhere. Horrific smells. Some dead children.

I lift some older citizens away from the fires, then report back to Piotr.

"Something's not right about this, boss."

Piotr's eyes are focused on some distant point. By the gentle arc of his stare I deduce he is tracking a moving object.

"RIIIIIIIIGHT FACE!" he cries. Instinctively, I spin ninety degrees to my right, just in time for Piotr to give me a hard shove.

He's shot me in the back.

I go down.

3

He's impossible.

At least he's toppled over. That one almost got us.

I give him a hand and then dust off his back. I guess I've ruined his shirt.

He seems to think it's funny, so we're good.

A lot of activity in the sky, now. Some planes are starting to land instead of just crashing into the ground. Notably, a Blackbird and what appears to be an F-117A. Strange that the latter should be out and about during the day. And at a

foreign air show, no less. Officially, the plane doesn't even exist.

A number of jeeps escort the two planes off the runway. A hangar is opened up and the parade disappears behind closed doors.

I motion to Thomas and he confirms.

We need to investigate.

4

What the hell are they doing?

Thomas and Piotr are inside the hanger. I lost them for a moment but then I caught site of my son's ridiculous spiked hair.

I move a few sentries into an adjacent corridor.

Then the boys turn left.

Suddenly, I flash on an idea.

The boys still haven't made their way out of the administrative offices. There is time to move the planes out the other side of the hangar. When they finally break through, the hangar will be empty. It's simple sleight of hand.

Obviously, nothing could ever be that easy.

Piotr picks up on the sounds of activity and they're faster breaching the main corridor than I had anticipated.

I make an executive decision to light up the whole building. The Air Force will have to take the loss. These men knew what they were signing up for.

I console myself that this will look great on television. Especially with the Soviet plane coming down first.

All in all, not a total loss.

8

5

When the explosions kick in I know for sure that my father is involved.

I hoist Piotr by his backpack and punch a hole through the roof. We're well above the fray by the time the building collapses. Piotr takes potshots at the scrambling jeeps.

The sky seems alive with fighter jets, all converging on our position.

I fly faster.

6

I'm shouting curses in Thomas' ear but at this speed he can't hear me. I know he can survive in a vacuum but I hope he remembers I've no protection against the cold. In the hopes of surviving our escape, I snatch the respirator from my backpack and stick it on my nose. The sky is growing dark.

7

My son is an idiot.

9

IMPRESSIVELY ARTICULATE

tags: 1989, 1990, christopher, eva_bright, john_ratcliff, ken_thompson, piro, tab1, tab2

1

The Chrysler Building. New York. 1989.

New Year's Eve.

"I'd like to propose a thought experiment for anti-Evolution Creationists: Suppose God created the 4-D space/time football six thousand years ago."

"Complete with billions of years of real history?"

"Exactly."

"Are you suggesting this would bypass their objections to evolutionary theory?"

"I'm suggesting it would confuse them."

2

"Here you are, doing the Devil's work."

Super-Sonic. John Ratcliff. White Male wearing tattered jeans and a gray sweater. Acclaimed poet. Enforcer.

"The Devil can cite Scripture for his own purpose. I'm merely speculating on possible angles of attack."

The Raven. Christopher. No last name on record. African-American vigilante. Black T-shirt with slogan in white News Gothic: 'Impressively Articulate.'

"I'd really like to hear what my father would have to say about all this."

Sonic Boom. Ken Thompson. Not *that* Ken Thompson. Asian-American speedster. Green polo shirt. Jeans.

"You're drowning in rhetoric," John observed. "Argumentation is not the best weapon against these types."

"Stipulated," allowed Christopher.

“You guys are too cynical.”
In unison: “Shut up, Ken.”

3

“Brothers, please. Decorum.”

Actron. Thomas Bright. White male. Ostensible leader of the Actron Team. Blue cotton button down shirt with black silk tie. Thomas brushed aside the disturbance and poured himself a glass of water from the fridge. Ken popped up the collar of his polo shirt and leaned back into his seat.

“I don’t mind, really. My ideas are still forming.”

“Shut up, Ken,” said Thomas.

“Enough of this dick party. We need a woman’s opinion. Where’s Eva?”

Christopher pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. He made eye contact with John before vacating the room.

“Nevermore,” he rasped, sarcastically, and left.

4

“What’s his problem?” asked Ken.

“They’re not getting along,” said Thomas, stating the obvious.

“Seriously though,” continued John, “Where *is* she? We were discussing this just last week. I know she has something to contribute, but I don’t want to speak for her. I want to hear her explain it herself.”

Thomas gestured with his glass, spilling a small amount of water onto the kitchen floor. “I think she’s on the phone with Los Angeles.”

5

“Yeah, let’s not tell him I called,” Piro wheezed into his mouthpiece, still catching his breath. “I don’t think we need to bother him with every detail of the operation.”

“Fine with me. You take care of yourself out there. From what I understand, L.A. is starting to...”

“Yeah, L.A. *is*.”

Eva clicked her phone shut and crushed her cigarette in the retractable ashtray. She wondered when it would be possible to move her corporation away from the cocaine trade. Recent developments in domestic politics were making it difficult to keep her agents’ names out of the news. She sighed, then drew the blinds in her office and made her way to the kitchen.

6

“Why did economists not do a better job of anticipating the crisis?”

“Tom, it’s just not that simple.”

“You *always* say that.”

“The causal mechanism behind growth and decline is not fully understood. All known models are essentially useless.”

“You always say *that*, too.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Well, tell me *something*. Tell me *anything*. I need answers.”

John rolled his eyes.

“What are you guys talking about?”

Eva sat down at the kitchen table and dealt a hand of cards.

“This and that,” said Thomas, picking up his cards and inspecting his hand.

“Christopher was going on about Creationists. Then he got mad and left.”

“Shut up, Ken,” said Eva.

Ken fumed silently. John remained silent for an appropriate interval and then picked up the dangling thread.

“Our Chris has an antagonistic bent. I suggested we should hear your side of the story. That was too much for him to bear.”

“It’s not like I would have *defended* the Creationists,” said Eva. “But I would have been fair.”

“Exactly,” smiled John.

“Whatever. Christopher is really focused on this issue. I’m sure it will come up again.”

“It’s inevitable,” sighed John.

“By design,” added Ken, and this time no one bothered to correct him.

Thomas’ luck was infuriating to his teammates. He won every hand but didn’t even understand the game.

“I’ll just take this one out of your paychecks,” he said.

“Your poker record is truly remarkable,” started John, “Considering we have to remind you of the rules every time we play.”

“What’s to remark? The fruits of a superior motivation.”

“Also known as the *Will to Power*. Tell us, just what lengths are you willing to go to in order to achieve your goals?”

“Not funny. Just a fact. Besides, I’ve moved on from Nietzsche.”

“There are no facts. And no one moves on from Nietzsche. We’ve caught you before. I suspect you’ve found a new way to cheat.”

“All right, I feel stupid,” admitted Thomas. “I don’t know what to say.”

John relaxed his posture, enjoying the easy victory. “I’ll give you a few seconds to come up with a story.”

“Fuck,” said Thomas.

“All right boys,” interrupted Eva, scooping up her playing cards and returning them to the deck. “Let’s keep it PG-13.”

“Mom, he’s cheating!” cried John. “Punish him!”

“No, I’m serious. You’re all fired,” Thomas said, and left the room. No one was sure if he was serious.

“And that settles that,” said Ken.

Eva’s phone rang as the clock turned over into 1990.

She switched off the ringer.

YOU'VE POSTED THIS BEFORE

tags: 1990, john_ratcliff, ken_thompson, piro, tab2

1

The Chrysler Building. New York. 1990.

January.

"You've posted this before."

"No shit."

"So why are you posting it again?"

Piro arched an eyebrow. "It's tradition."

"Seriously?"

Piro sat at the keyboard clacking away. Simple, declarative sentences. Topical assertions.

"Nobody cares about this stupid newsletter," offered Thomas.

Piro remained silent. Typing.

"Nobody's even going to read it."

Silence.

"Your spelling sucks."

Piro flicked on the radio and turned up the volume.

Thomas grimaced. "I hate reading."

Piro leaned over the mimeograph machine, making small adjustments to various knobs and switches while Thomas fidgeted in the doorway.

"There's literally no way I'm going to help you fold all of those things."

"I don't care."

"This whole side-project is stupid. You really think the value-added is necessary? This stuff sells itself. No 'free gift with purchase' required."

Piro stopped what he was doing and turned to face his twin brother.

“If you’re not going to contribute to the newsletter, please go into the kitchen and start bagging up rocks.”

Thomas shrugged and wandered out of the room.

2

Ken steered the Actron Team’s 1978 Lincoln Town Car through the streets of Alphabet City. Trash on the sidewalk reflected in the car’s fresh candy paint. Passing some children, Ken boosted the volume on the custom sound system. The children giggled and pointed. He smiled and mashed the gas pedal. Shining.

Destination: The G-Spot.

Ken rounded the final corner and slowly brought the outsized car to a stop. He lowered a tinted window and inspected his immediate surroundings. The parking lot was deserted save for two NYPD cruisers and a 1979 Chevrolet Monte Carlo (sky blue metal flake, white interior, whitewall tires; that would be John). Ken popped the collar on his polo shirt and exited the vehicle.

Inside, the club was all but vacant. Smoke from an abandoned cigarette snaked upward towards a light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The two police officers were inspecting a briefcase full of cocaine. One of them turned around and smiled dumbly, coke caked in his mustache. John Ratcliff stood nearby, a duffel bag full of money slung over his shoulder. When he saw his partner he frowned and shrugged.

Ken stood in the entryway and surveyed the empty stage. Strobe lights clicked rhythmically, strangely loud in the otherwise silent environs.

“Where the white women at?” he finally asked.

The cop with the coke mustache started to giggle, but never finished his outburst. Ken activated his super-speed and

closed the distance between himself and the two officers in a hundred milliseconds flat. He slammed the meat of his open hand into the first officer's chin, then rolled with the momentum into the second officer's chest, following him to the ground. Both cops collapsed, unconscious, Ken straightened himself and dusted off his knees.

"Hmph," he he remarked, unimpressed.

John hoisted both men from the floor and hung them by their jacket collars on coat hooks near the front entrance. Each would see hospital time but neither would suffer permanent injury. John tossed the bag full of money at Ken and made his way over to the bar to pour himself a drink.

"Tired of this grind."

"So quit."

"You're funny."

Ken sighed.

"Yeah."

3

Outside, some children had wandered into the parking lot and were peering inside Jon's Monte Carlo, noses pressed up against the glass.

"Boy, is that white leather?"

"Sure is."

"My brother's car is like this, but his doesn't have leather."

"Sounds like your brother needs to find himself a better paying job."

Ken flopped the briefcase full of coke onto the hood of the car.

"Take this to your brother. If he brings it back in a week, filled with money..."

“We have great health insurance,” interrupted John. “Dental and vision. Also, free car detailing. We’ll see what we can do about his vinyl seats.”

”*Wow, mister! Thanks!*”

John patted the boy on the head and then got into the Monte Carlo and peeled out. Ken smoked a cigarette, wandered back to the Lincoln and rolled over a beer bottle on his way out of the parking lot. There was no damage to the Town Car’s bullet-proof tires.

As soon as the adults were gone the boys pounced on the briefcase, numerous hands scooping out coke and heaving it carelessly over their shoulders. As it happened, directly into the wind. Some of the powder blew back and caught in their teeth and hair. Undeterred by this minor annoyance, the boys wiped the backs of their hands across their faces and soon discovered the rows of individually wrapped crack rocks that lined the bottom of the briefcase. Immediately, they went to work removing the wrappers.

Tossing the pebbles of crack aside, each paper wrapper was inspected closely, compared carefully with the others. Soon it became apparent that all of the wrappers were identical. Worse, the material was immediately recognizable. Not just predictable, but in fact an exact duplicate of an issue they had all read before.

“It’s a fucking reprint,” said one of the boys.

He flipped over the wrapper, frantically scanning for the publisher information. There, printed in bold Helvetica, was the name of their nemesis:

Massive Fictions. Piotr Bright, Publisher.

The Chrysler Building.

NYC.

One of the boys produced a brick phone from his backpack and put in a call to headquarters.

Calling in for backup.

YOU ARE NOT A GADGET, HE CLAIMED, VIA CELLPHONE

tags: 1990, eva_bright, freeway_ricky_ross, jaron_lanier, ken_thompson, piro, tab1,
tab2

1

Dreamed I was a tomcat.

Trundling along the side of the road, fur matted with dirty snow. Searching for illegal narcotics.

My women were nowhere to be found.

Which was fine.

I happened to be armed. As I ambled along, a car sped by and splashed sludge in my face. I fired three rounds into its rear-right tire and the driver went over an embankment. An excruciating crashing noise followed. It rang in my ears.

I approached the vehicle and emptied the rest of my weapon into the driver's chest.

I found part of a hollowed out cantaloupe and slipped it over my head.

Cute.

No one would prosecute a Persian cat.

2

"Oh, great."

"What?"

"I accidentally saved an image of Spider-Man in my porn folder."

"So? Move it. Or delete it."

"But I clicked 'Save' without seeing the name of the file."

"So?"

“So, how am I supposed to find it? This folder is 5TB. I don’t want that Spider-Man image to someday be found amongst my archival porn.”

“So, go back and start to save it again and see what the suggested filename is. You probably just hit ‘Enter’ when you saved it.”

“That... is a very good idea.”

“I think I once helped your dad with a similar problem.”

3

Jaron Lanier scooped up a handful of the white powder and inspected it closely.

“This appears to be cocaine.”

“No shit, Lanier,” said Piro.

Lanier peered into his hand, face wrinkled in concentration.

Piro turned to Thomas. “He’s always like this.”

“He doesn’t get high out of our supply, does he?”

Piro stopped Thomas before he went any further with that line of thought.

“No. At least, not that I’m aware.”

4

It turned out that my son had the drugs.

Nepeta cataria. Fifty grams. I’m certain his intent was to sell.

I left ten grams with an I.O.U.

The rest I put in my nose. I then put on dark sunglasses to mask my dilated pupils, the visible redness in my eyes.

A car drove by and its pilot tossed an empty beer can at my head. It bounced off the cantaloupe and skittered into the grass by the side of the road.

I peered at the exhaust trail over the top of my sunglasses.
Then I pulled out my gun.

5

It was Ken on the phone.

“Lanier, I need some help with these verb tenses.”

“Not now, Ken, we’re... weighing... the drugs.”

Piro snatched the phone away from him and barked into the mouthpiece.

“Ken! Not on this phone!”

He jammed his thumb on the ‘End’ button and then turned back to Lanier.

“Are you *damaged*? He can study on his own time!”

“Sorry, sorry,” said Lanier, taking a kilo off of the scales.

Piro extracted the SIM card from the phone and crushed it in his hand.

“Card,” he said.

Ricky tossed him a replacement and Piro snapped it into place, booted up the phone. He dialed New York.

“Eva, patch me through to Nicaragua.”

Some moments passed and then Piro began shouting into the mouthpiece in gutter Spanish. He rung off and handed the phone back to Lanier.

“Don’t lose that.”

Thomas finished with his baggies and then dusted off his hands.

“Ken’s obsession with Japanese culture is becoming a problem. He can’t keep his mind on his work. Someone needs to ship him back to Japan.”

Piro rolled his eyes. Not for the first time that day.

“His parents don’t *want* him back. At least not until he learns to speak Japanese.”

“Huh. That seems unlikely to happen. Couldn’t we just do fansubs for them?”

The men all shared a laugh and then got back to work.

6

Ken unpaused and then re-paused the DVD.

He was at an impasse. The episode of DOUBLE CATS was only a quarter of the way through, but he was having trouble understanding the dialogue. Finally, he had given up and called Lanier for help.

He was supposed to be translating these episodes for the torrent site.

How could he admit that as a native Japanese, he couldn’t even speak his own language?

His mind raced. Activating his super-speed, he cleaned up his apartment and did the dishes in just under four seconds, moving so fast he knocked over a bookshelf and had to re-shelve the books. This added another two seconds to the tally. He started a pot of spaghetti noodles boiling and took some wine out of the refrigerator. Another half-second.

The impending public humiliation would surely kill him.

Unexpectedly, the phone rang.

“Ken.”

It was Lanier.

“I can’t stay on here long, but let hear some of the phrases and I’ll give you some quick translations.”

“All right, the cat is wearing a cantaloupe on its head, it just pulled out a gun and shot out the tires of a car. The car went into a ditch and crashed. Now the cat is smoking a cigarette and putting on a pair of sunglasses. The cat says: *Baka.*”

Lanier paused before answering.

“What... What exactly are we translating here?”

“It’s an anime. I’m supposed to be doing fansubs. I committed to the first six episodes by tonight.”

“That’s a lot of work, Ken. You’re not a gadget, you know.”

“Yeah, but geeze, shouldn’t I at least be able to handle this? I didn’t even start learning English until I was six years old. How could I have completely forgotten my own language?”

“Uh, I’ve gotta go.”

Lanier hung up.

7

“What are you doing? Give me the phone.”

Piro took the cellphone and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. He pushed Lanier out of the way and then locked the door to the kitchen.

“Thomas. Set the timers. We need a good twenty minutes to get out of the neighborhood.”

Thomas set all the detonators and the team evacuated the little house.

“Maybe I should call dad,” he said, once he had finished loading up his gear.

“Why?”

“He might have some good ideas about how to...” Now it was Thomas’ turn to roll his eyes. “Oh, *never mind.*”

The men climbed into their white van and pulled away from the safe house. As the vehicle accelerated into traffic, Lanier began to scribble in his notebook.

Piro gestured towards him, frowning.

“I don’t want this guy coming along with us next time.”

“What did *I* do,” Lanier protested.

“Shut up,” the rest of the men said in unison.

“This is a business,” Piro began. “There’s not time for dicking around with language studies and sketching portraits.”

Thomas pretended to ignore the scene from behind his visor. He brought up some sports scores and wondered at the meticulous pointlessness of the statistics industry.

“Huh. It looks like the Bears have taken the Super Bowl.”

The van hit a bump and for a split second Thomas’ visor slid up and exposed his face.

“Oh God, what’s wrong with his eyes?” asked Lanier.

Thomas stuck out his tongue and went back to scanning the news.

SENSE OF DEBT

tags: 1954, 1990, coco_schwab, david_bowie, piro, tab2

1

November, 1954.

Bowie picked up the envelope and ran his finger along its edge, holding it in his hand for a moment of silent admiration before tearing it open with his fingernail and devouring its contents.

But inside was an actual piece of correspondence.

He slammed the door to his dressing room and sulked in his chair. This was unconscionable.

The note was from his mother.

Dear Son,

it read.

I have received another notice from your creditors. This cannot go on. I am going to give them your address. If you do not write to them, I'm going to suggest that they call the police. There is nothing more I can do for you. I will not pay off another one of your debts. If that means that you go to jail, then so be it.

Love,

Mom

Bowie crumpled the note and tossed it on his makeup table. He opened a bottle of water and poured it on the carpet, tracing an occult symbol that was only present in his mind.

The bitch! I have overhead!

A quiet knock came at the door. Then another, somewhat louder.

He straightened, all trace of disquiet drained from his face. Time to take the stage.

2

Piro and Thomas hopped into the RAGNAROK and strapped on their seatbelts. The engine warbled softly as Thomas adjusted his data gloves.

“What’s the difference between a raven and a writing desk?” asked Thomas, gesturing through a cloud of invisible information.

“By weight?” asked the other.

“Sure.”

“I’d say bout fifty kilos.”

“Sounds about right,” agreed Thomas, scribbling in his palm. “Anyway, we ought to go further back and try to sell some of this stuff to all those 19th century artsy types who were hooked on heroine. Can you imagine?”

“No, I can’t,” said Piro.

“Aw, come on.”

Ignoring his twin brother, Piro accelerated smoothly into the clouds above New York City.

Lately, Thomas was spending far too much of his free time reading children’s literature.

3

Bowie stomped through the concert, affecting strange poses. Back in his dressing room, he unwadded the note from his mother and then wadded it back up again, lit it on fire with his cigarette lighter. Coco rushed over and doused the flames with a tumbler of scotch.

Which didn't help at all.

Bowie stripped off his Puerto Rican jacket and patted out the fire. He was careful of his shoes.

"That was incredibly stupid," he said, icily. "Now I've ruined my shoulder pads. What were you thinking about?"

"Reflex," was all she could offer in reply.

Changing tacks, Bowie started digging around in her purse.

"You've got so much *crap* in here. Where's the coke?"

"We're out."

"*What*," he growled, turning back towards her, baring his teeth. The cigarette fell out of his mouth and landed on the carpet. Coco ran over and crushed it with her heel.

She was out of scotch.

Bowie also noticed that she had retrieved a baggy from a hidden compartment in her brassiere.

"Only kidding," she said, waving it towards his face.

Bowie snatched the baggy and sat back down in his chair. Engrossed.

"We can't have any more of these close calls," he sighed, and dove in.

4

Piro piloted the RAGNAROK towards 1954.

Thomas was dozing. Noticing this, Piro took the opportunity to put on some soft music.

Suddenly, Thomas started awake. He shot forward and Piro heard a loud thump. He looked over and Thomas had hit his forehead on the dashboard.

"WHAT! IS! THIS! CRAP!" he shouted. Piro couldn't be certain whether he was reacting to the noise or to the pain.

"Bowie. 'Golden Years.'"

“You’re one of those people who listens to every album by an artist while you’re driving to see them in concert, aren’t you.”

Piro remained silent. Piloting.

“Plus, your chronology is off. In 1954, he hasn’t even written this song yet.”

Piro reached for the dash and ejected the cassette.

“Fine. See? I’m putting it away.”

5

Coco had come up with a new supplier. She was on the phone with them now. Bowie stared nervously at her hands as she wound the phone cord around her finger. A knock came at the door while she was still talking. Now she was chewing on her pencil. She didn’t seem to hear.

Bowie glanced at the door, and then back at Coco.

Oblivious, she kept on talking.

Bowie coughed, quietly. His eyes were pleading with her to hear, to do something. Of course, he couldn’t say anything. It was not his place to answer the door. Sweat running down his neck, he kicked over a chair. Then tried to look composed.

The knock came again.

This time, Coco noticed the disturbance. She picked up the phone and started towards the door.

Bowie fell back in his chair. A wave of relief swept over his sunken features.

He lit a cigarette.

6

Piro pulled out his flip-phone and dialed the new customers.

“I’ll just make sure they’re ready for us,” he whispered.

Piro talked for ten minutes. It seemed like an endless amount of chitchat. Thomas had no patience for customer relations, but Piro seemed to relish any opportunity to interact with a client.

And this woman.

Was Thomas actually jealous?

He booted up his gun.

Now Piro was knocking on the door. Why? Just tell her we're here.

Hm. No answer from the marks.

7

Just as Coco turned the door handle, both of the doors blew violently inward, completely off of their hinges. Coco was thrown to the ground. Fortunately for her, the Bakelite telephone took the worst of it.

Bowie stared in paralyzed horror at the shattered pieces of plastic on the floor. He was transfixed. There was something familiar here. Something about the pattern of debris... Abruptly, he snapped out of it. This was how it always was with him, he observed. One second in dreamland and the next fully focused.

"Coco. Take dictation."

"Rrrrm..." she moaned.

"Get up," he insisted.

Piro and Thomas entered, weapons drawn, targeting both adult humans with practiced efficiency.

Bowie ignored them.

"When the phone broke, I looked down at the carpet. The cracked plastic formed a picture. I saw the letters: s, h, n, z, n."

Coco maintained her expression. It would take more than an explosion and a broken telephone to rattle her.

“It’s Shenzhen, China.”

“*What?*” asked Thomas.

I see, Coco said with her eyes. “Real estate or commodities?”

“Real estate. Get Tony on the phone. We’ll grab as much as we can, now, while it’s still available. Sort it out later. I’ve got a good feeling about this one.”

“How much do we spend?”

Bowie was rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, loosening his necktie. He snorted conspicuously and answered quickly.

“All of it.”

8

“I don’t know, Mr. Bowie, it seems rather unorthodox to sign your mother’s name to a cocaine bill.”

“She’s my business partner. And we’re going to need plenty of marching powder for the new venture.”

Coco arranged the paperwork on the table as Bowie signed his mother’s name at the bottom of each page. She reached over and smoothed down his eyebrow as he worked.

Thomas was smiling.

Piro decided it didn’t matter. “I guess it will have to do.”

Bowie suddenly looked concerned. “Are you sure you won’t have any problems filling the standing order?”

Thomas motioned with his thumb.

“You wouldn’t believe how much of this stuff we have back in the ship.”

At this, Piro decided to interject.

“So long as you can come up with the money, there is literally an unlimited supply.”

Bowie looked please with himself. His yellow teeth shined a skeleton grin.

“*Friends*. I think this is going to work out just fine.”

BIG PANTIES

tags: 1991, christopher, eva_bright, ken_thompson, maude_mold, piro, plinth_mold, tab2

1

May, 1991.

These memories simulate a very dark period in my life.

2

I had dumped an awful lot of money into Next Computer. For obvious reasons, this troubled the King.

“Maryland Procurement Office,” I would remind. “We’re just shoring up inventory.”

“It’s easier to buy a judge than to ask for permission,” the King would retort.

Whatever that was supposed to mean.

“Perot is our man. Remember who works for whom.”

But the King did in fact hold the purse strings. At least in this decade. I looked forward to a time when the man could be properly disposed of. Driven from the enterprise.

At this rate, he would snort his way through our operating capital in a matter of weeks.

3

I grew weary of kings. After a short period of deliberation I disabled comms with 4086. It was an obvious measure too long delayed.

4

Christopher threw down his leaf in disgust.

“This book is crap,” he said.

Ken checked the flashing index. BLACK GANGSTER, by Donald Goines.

“So, what’s so bad about it?” he asked.

“Nothing. If you’ve never committed a crime in your life, and you don’t know the difference between gorilla pimping and—”

“I don’t know, I read it when I was a teenager. It seemed realistic enough to me.”

Christopher rolled his eyes until it hurt and snapped a new clip into his pistol. He decided to change the subject.

“You got the crack?”

“I don’t know, Chris, I’m not so sure I can trust your judgment anymore. I’m starting to wonder if your political views are having an influence on your—”

Christopher pulled down his ski-mask and turned off his phone. He walked over and poked Ken directly in the chest.

“I don’t give a fuck who you think you can trust. Stop whining and get in the van.”

The two men took their places in the vehicle.

“I’m in like Flynn,” said Ken.

Christopher punched Ken in the neck.

“Put on your seat belt.”

5

My organization ran with a minimum of friction.

Piro handled operations. Eva ran comms. Thomas... mostly stocked shelves.

I took notes.

In this way, the years advanced, unrolling like paper tape from under one of my old shirts.

I liked to stay hands-off. There could be no benefit to my constantly butting heads with the lower-level management. Besides, Piro was reasonably competent.

We didn't fraternize, on the whole.

My wife was a different story. She simply couldn't follow the program. I discovered her trail more than once.

Unacceptable sloppiness. This was a business.

In November, 1991, with some regret, I disabled her power source.

6

"Instead of improvements, we got features."

"These panties are huge."

"Just put them on."

Christopher pulled into the driveway and withdrew his key from the ignition. He looked over at Ken and wondered how the man had ever passed a cursory background check.

Christopher adjusted his costume panties.

Without warning, the windshield exploded inward.

Plinth Mold's hand extended well beyond its normal range, traversing the length of the van's hood and grasping Christopher's flack jacket. His other hand slithered into the cabin and found purchase around Ken's throat.

Plinth yanked both men from the vehicle, trailing bits of shatterproof glass. He deposited them both onto the sidewalk.

7

"Boss! What are you doing here?"

Plinth tapped Ken's face to the ground. The smaller man writhed mindlessly, firearm forgotten, oversized panties gathered around his ankles.

Plinth examined the situation. It was a stuck process. Too late for circumcision, but too soon for canonization.

And yet, he couldn't fire these men. Not exactly.

"Why are you both wearing giant panties?"

The two characters represented a significant investment of system resources. Several proven quantities from the writing pool had been used up, filling in their histories. It was likely that, once terminated, the processes would not even relinquish the memory that had already been consumed.

"It's our body armor, boss."

It was not the answer Plinth had wanted to hear.

Never mind. He resolved to make yet more adjustments to the running system.

He dialed the Chrysler Building and patched himself through to Piro.

8

The incompetence...

It wouldn't have been fair to blame them, but still I couldn't look at their faces. Could I see myself in this?

Never mind. I resolved to make yet more adjustments to the running system. Not premature optimization, but triage. The machine hadn't yet crashed, but experience had taught me to expect more trouble.

Perhaps humorously, I still thought it possible to prevent a catastrophe.

I dialed the Chrysler Building and patched myself through to Piro.

9

Plinth's wallet had deactivated itself due to suspicious activity. The King had emptied the last of the corporate

accounts. As a result, it took more than two years to hup the errant processes. With his other resources tied up in acquisitions, Plinth simply couldn't afford the man hours needed to affect the required changes.

In the end, as he suspected, the corrupted system memory was not freed when the processes restarted.

Programs continued to hang. The big panties should have been a clear warning sign, but this was a realization that came little, too late.

Eventually, the entire system bogged down.

Plinth couldn't log out.

10

Fuck it, I'll reboot.

11

Years ago, the plane jerked.

FINAL REPORT OF TEAM 34

tags: 1991, 1994, federal_grants, nana_mold, paris_mold, piro, plinth_mold, shit_mold, tab2, violet

1

August, 1994.

Team 34, initial report.

As dictated by Captain Paris Mold.

Tear down. Clean up. Soft seductions.

We're always called in on the quiet jobs. The ones with a lot of work to be done, preferably without a lot of noise.

I have to admit, the world is a pretty big mess.

My team is competent. We pack light, so we can cover a lot of ground in a short period of time.

Reputation. Dependability.

We don't deal in names, but we're well known to the people that matter.

We do okay.

2

I task three assets to the South Pacific. One to the Chrysler Building. I don't trust anyone but myself with Plinth.

Violet continues to elude us.

We've laid down some perimeter product placement, biding our time.

Nothing is coming up. It's difficult to predict emerging demographics, the interactions of different products. And Violet is a professional. Humans melt in her hands.

I decide to call my mother.

3

“Barfight! Dipstick! Bricoloage! Go! Go! Go!”

Mother screams at my men through her mouthpiece. They aren’t used to hearing her shouting on the wire.

“Nana! Where the hell have you been? We’re on overtime!”

A firefight is underway. Clearing old signage means engaging Plinth’s aerosol defenses. We’re prepared, but understaffed.

“Keep formation, boys! I’m losing your signal!”

At least Plinth is alone in this fight. We were careful to remove old man Jerrymander from the board, decades prior to the meltdown.

For her part, Mother keeps a tight handle on the Mold family backups.

4

February, 1991.

Federal Grants straightens his paperwork and peers deeply into Plinth Mold’s single working eye.

There is a subtle click and Mold’s head inclines towards Grants. The gesture is all but imperceptible.

“Why don’t you tell me about your childhood.”

Dust plays in the sunlight streaming in through the library window.

“Have you ever read a book called *The Indian In The Cupboard?*” asks Plinth. “A children’s piece. Published around 1960.”

Fed stifles a guffaw. “Please. I don’t read kiddie trash. I’ve never even heard of it.”

“My brother Pennis and I—we—*published* that book.”

Immediately, Grants realizes his tactical error. “I—I’m sorry.”

“It was a thinly veiled retelling of the origin of our family.”
This is no good. Grants panics, leaps from his seat. “Sir,
I—”

“I think we’re finished here.”

Plinth rises, exits.

5

PLINTH’S LOG 524780 SECONDS FROM THE EPOCH

With the last hard boot less than a year in the past, the world is already growing crowded. Mostly with clean-up crews. I assume my brother Paris is amongst the rabble.

There are many starting conditions to seed.

Mother called, earlier today. Clean-up proceeds apace. Paris *is* amongst the rabble, but Violet remains hidden. I’ve asked her not to reveal my whereabouts, either, for the time being.

I’ve also reinstated the Crown. And the Crown has renewed my funding.

I’m thinking about re-spawning Thomas and Piro. They might amuse me in this new world.

And, that’s about it. For this month. More after the new year.

6

January, 1995.

Team 34, final report.

As dictated by Captain Paris Mold.

Product placement has been completed. Rulesets have been configured. Once customers start populating the layouts, later

this year, we should start to see good numbers. I think we can handle the traffic.

We've decided to go with a variation on the initial predilections from the last iteration. Non-standard prejudices. These first new customers will find themselves inexplicably drawn towards the Asiatic races and the flickering of camp fires. There is some debate over whether or not a fascination with fire will hamper their survival rate. Will they fuck themselves to death before they even get a chance to starve? Will the flames and their genitals mix favorably?

Ha, that's the test, isn't it?

Still no sign of Violet.

Or my brothers.

Mother has gone quiet.

Ping.

END CRASH ORIGIN

the saga continues

textadventure.stanleylieber.com

about the author

Stanley Lieber has started a new novel.

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